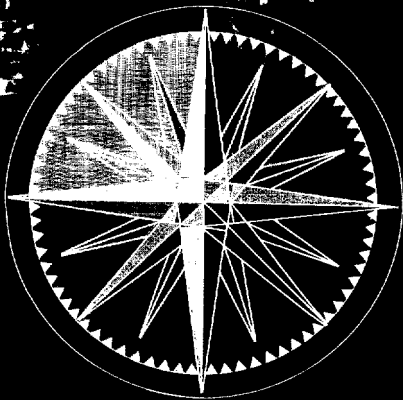


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SPECIAL REPORT

THE BUDDHIST OPPOSITION IN BURMA

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THE BUDDHIST OPPOSITION IN BURMA

Religious leaders in predominantly Buddhist Burma are showing increasing discontent with General Ne Win's authoritarian regime. The Buddhist clergy complain of steps taken to dissociate the government from religion and are offended by the regime's socialistic program. In recent months they have been criticizing the government more openly on political grounds and find a sympathetic response from broad segments of the people. Ne Win faces a choice between allowing the agitation to build up further, or suppressing it, thus risking alienation of even more of the public.

Buddhism in Burmese Life

Some 85-90 percent of Burma's 23 million people are Theravada Buddhists. Their sect, also the predominant religion in Ceylon, Thailand, and Cambodia, is considered the purest form of Buddhism as distinguished from the less formal and less disciplined Mahayana Buddhism found in South Vietnam. The religion pervades much of Burmese life, especially in rural areas.

There are some 109,000 monks among Burma's Buddhist clergy (called the sangha) or about one for every 200 Buddhists--men, women, and children. The Buddhist monk is a central figure to whom the Burmese traditionally turn for counsel and leadership in a wide range of matters, both religious and secular. His influential position entitles him to deferential forms of speech and behavior. Every boy is expected to spend at least a short period as a novice in a monastery, and in many vil-

lages the monastery school, staffed by sayadaws (teaching monks), is the only educational institution.

Although the monks are theoretically concerned only with spiritual matters, their participation in political affairs became firmly established during the nationalist movement against the British. After Burmese independence, Buddhism became intertwined with the state apparatus during U Nu's many years as prime minister. Nu strongly championed the religion both to broaden his political support and because of his personal beliefs, and initiated a wide-ranging program designed to raise the status of Buddhism. This culminated in the passage of a constitutional amendment in 1961 establishing it as the state religion of Burma.

On seizing power in March 1962, General Ne Win reversed this trend. While not hostile to the practice of Buddhism (Ne Win himself is nominally a

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Buddhist), the military regime charged that Nu's espousal of Buddhist causes for political purposes was one of his government's major weaknesses. Ne Win terminated the official status of two Buddhist councils within the government, lifted a Buddhist-instigated ban on the slaughter of cattle, and, by suspending the constitution, rendered the state religion amendment inoperative. His government also refused to observe the Buddhist "sabbath," and campaigned against the tradition of donating large sums to pagodas and monasteries. Continued detention of long-time patron Nu has also disturbed the sangha. In addition, many monks believe that the regime's Marxist-oriented philosophy is incompatible with Buddhism.

The Buddhist Leaders

The Buddhist clergy's opposition to the Ne Win regime is by no means unanimous. Possibly as many as 40 percent of the monks have leftist sympathies. This element, while unhappy with many of the government's actions and supporting protests on several prime issues, is equally intent on avoiding any link with the regime's political opponents. Many of the leftist sympathizers are organized in the Yahan Nge League.

Nevertheless, the opposition movement has enjoyed the more or less active support of the great majority of monks,

and has the blessing of the All-Burma Presiding Sayadaws' Association, the sangha's executive body. An organization of over 30,000 monks called the Yahanpyo League is in the forefront of the Buddhists' opposition to Ne Win. The League is affiliated with the Anti-Fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFPFL), Burma's original nationalist party and now the leading opposition political force.

An 82-year-old monk, U Kethaya, who stands high in the ranks of the clergy and has great influence throughout the country because of his association with Burma's independence movement, is chief spokesman and front for the Yahanpyo League. Real direction of the opposition movement, however, comes from U Kuthalla, a monk with extensive AFPFL connections. Kuthalla manages a publishing house in Mandalay which has published Burmese translations of several anti-Communist books under agreement with USIS.

Recent Issues

Early this year the government provided the Buddhists with an emotional issue when it seized control of the four entrance colonnades to the ancient and revered Mahamyatmuni pagoda in Mandalay--the center of Burma's religious learning. Rangoon claimed the action was necessary in order to preserve them as a public monument. In a series of protest meetings

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throughout Burma, the sangha charged that the seizure constituted interference in religious affairs and marked a first step toward more serious moves against Buddhism. A prominent monk threatened to call on American forces in Thailand for assistance. After three months of mounting protests the government capitulated and returned the colonnades to the Buddhists.

As the colonnades issue was subsiding, many Buddhists focused their attack on the association of a controversial monk with the regime. This sayadaw, Shin Okkahta, has been a long-time spokesman for the leftist elements among the clergy and is noted for his attempts to reconcile Marxism and Buddhism. He founded an organization that espouses the government's policies regarding religion, and is believed to have co-authored the regime's formal statement of its political philosophy, The Burmese Way to Socialism.

Many of Shin Okkahta's fellow monks also bitterly oppose his unorthodox views on reincarnation. Their attacks on him for his heretical views, however, are actually another expression of their antagonism toward the government. The campaign against him reached its climax last July when all Buddhist organizations--even the leftist Yahan Nge League--excommunicated him. Okkahta still serves as a prime target for attacks against the regime.

The suppression of Buddhists in South Vietnam was also used to embarrass and harass the government. The sangha demanded that Ne Win urge the US to intervene. Despite the regime's different political orientation from Ngo Dinh Diem's, it feared setting a precedent for future outside interference in its own affairs and determined to follow its foreign policy of semi-isolation, was reluctant to cooperate publicly even with other Asian states in condemning Saigon. Buddhist leaders claimed that this policy provided further proof of the Ne Win government's lack of proper concern for religion.

Rising Tempo of Opposition

The Yahanpyo League has succeeded in forming an active group of oppositionists with the general backing of the sangha, the AFPFL, and Nu's Union Party. Through a series



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of mass meetings on religious issues with political overtones, this group appears to have aroused the sympathy of the majority of the people, especially the rural masses, against the government, even though so far they have shown only passive support.

Since August the line has gradually shifted. Monks now harangue crowds on the primarily political topic of the danger of Communism within the government. In a series of mass rallies in the Mandalay area monks led by Kethaya have gone so far as to call for the government's overthrow. They have stirred crowds of six to ten thousand to chant "Down with the so-called Revolutionary Ne Win rebel government."

Kethaya even gently predicts Ne Win's assassination, with a syllogism that runs: the government is Communist; Communists are evil; evil men die untimely deaths; thus the members of the present government will die soon. These speeches therefore fall short of a call to arms, but merely for passive resistance, with a promise that evil will soon pass.

Despite growing popular sentiment against the regime, the opposition confronts in the army a force which it has scarcely penetrated and which remains the crucial element of power in Burma. Individual officers are dissatisfied, but there is yet no concrete indi-

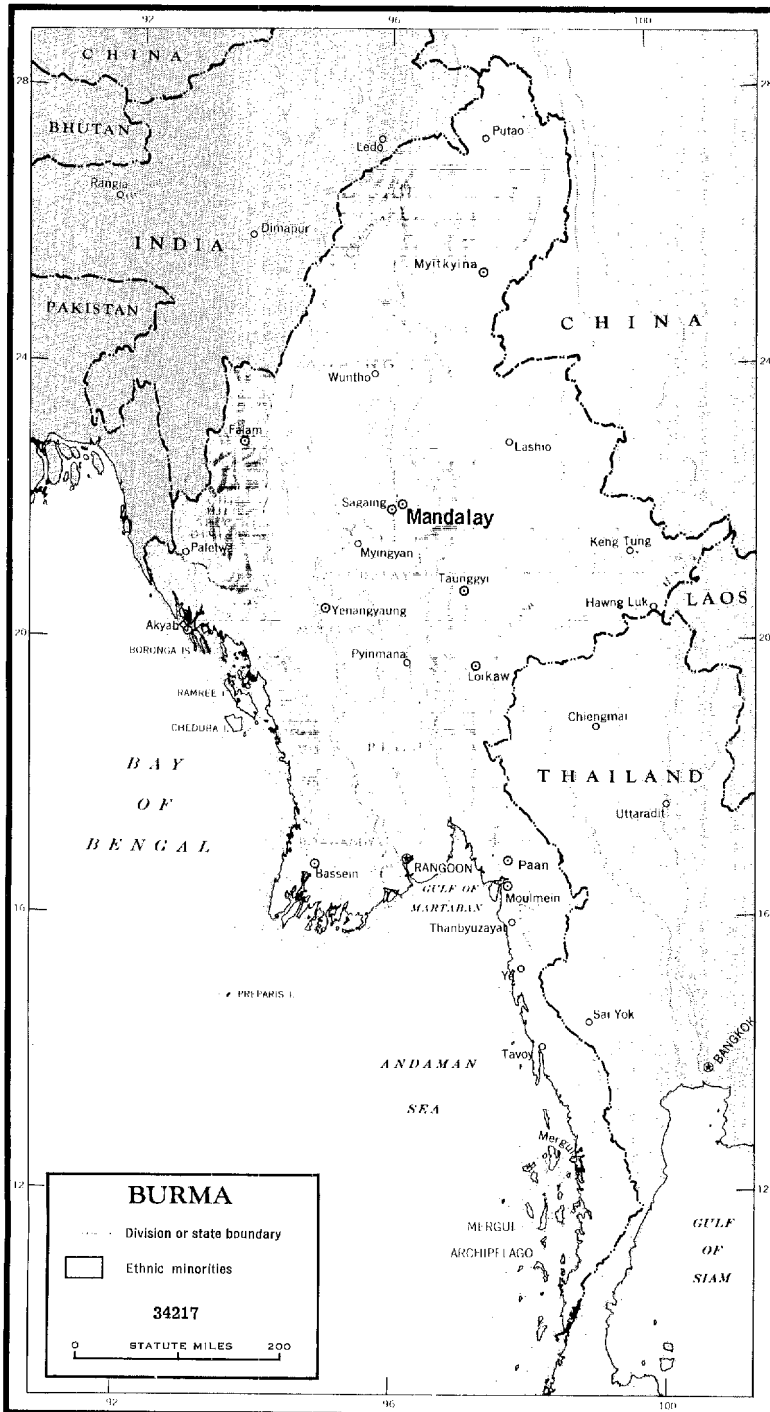
cation of any united army faction. Kuthalla has stated that ex-Brigadier Aung Gyi, Ne Win's former number-two man, is preparing to lead an AFPFL-Yahanpyo opposition, and that he will be called upon to assume the leadership once a campaign of passive resistance and noncooperation has been organized.

Aung Gyi recently has been building a public image of correct Buddhist piety by visits to pagodas and monasteries in the Mandalay area, but thus far he has been careful to give no indication of involvement with religious or opposition political leaders. If passive resistance fails, according to Kuthalla, the Yahanpyo League's strategy includes a possible attempt at armed revolt in cooperation with Shan and Kachin insurgents in northern Burma. Aung Gyi's participation presumably would be essential if plans advance to this stage.

Outlook

The present phase of openly political activity against the government will test the ability of the Buddhist opposition to carry the campaign forward in the face of conflicting attitudes within the sangha. The more conservative monks will probably draw back, for example, if the activist direction the movement is taking continues.

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At the moment, however, Ne Win has been placed in a dilemma. Because of the strength of religious tradition in Burma and the respect for the sangha, the Buddhist leaders are in an almost invulnerable position. The regime is well aware that a crackdown on them could arouse widespread dissatisfaction among the usually apathetic rural masses, and also perhaps a closing of ranks among the clergy.

On the other hand, the regime is also aware that vociferous Buddhist critics, if unrestrained, could mobilize other disaffected or disgruntled elements such as the business community and the growing number of urban unemployed.

So far Ne Win, who has arrested virtually all top opposition political leaders, has chosen to avoid a direct confrontation with the sangha. The government has ignored a recent dare by Kethaya to arrest him and face a reaction that would cause its overthrow. Should dissatisfaction continue to spread under present policies, however, Ne Win may well decide that the risks of further erosion of his position demand accepting the dangers involved in a crackdown. (SECRET)

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